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C O N F I D E N T I A L ZAGREB 000431

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SCE - KABUMOTO, BENEDICT

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EU](#) [HR](#)

SUBJECT: EU DELAY: SANADER SAYS GLASS STILL HALF FULL

REF: A. ZAGREB 418

[B](#). ZAGREB 173

[C](#). 04 ZAGREB 2207

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph Frank for reasons 1.5 (b) & (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: PM Ivo Sanader did his best to put a positive spin on the GAERC's March 16 decision to delay negotiations with Croatia, focusing on the approval of the negotiating framework and the fact that more countries were in favor of opening negotiations than against it. During the PM's address to Parliament today, he said the decision should not discourage anyone and the government must maintain its focus on reforms. All indications are that Sanader remains firmly in control of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), with no rumblings from the party's right wing.

[1](#)2. (U) Opposition leaders generally supported Sanader's line, saying Croatia must press on with reforms despite the delay and confirming they will not seek early elections. This generally constructive approach appears to have soothed any public anxiety (ref A). Only the far right Croatian Party of Rights (HSP) tried to make political hay out of the decision, laying responsibility for the delay, which HSP president Anto Djapic said could last 20 years, squarely at the feet of the Sanader government.

[1](#)3. (C) Today's muted public reaction is a welcome development. Most Croatians are unsurprised and generally unconcerned with the delay. A common opinion expressed in television interviews and polls has been that the country is unprepared to begin negotiations anyway. Euroskeptics are attempting to claim the day, with leaders of the interest group "Independence and Progress" (SIN), the most vocal opponent to EU membership, calling for a public protest on Zagreb's main square to essentially thumb their noses at Brussels. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

CROATIAN NATIONAL TELEVISION TAKES LEADERS TO TASK

[1](#)4. (U) Relatively little attention is being focused on the role of ICTY fugitive Ante Gotovina on the delay. However, perhaps the most significant media event of the past 48 hours was a Croatian National Television segment comparing comments made by Sanader, opposition leader and former PM Ivica Racan, Speaker of Parliament Vladimir Seks and others over the last 4 years, ranging from opposition to the indictment and evasive answers to questions about efforts to apprehend Gotovina to the most recent calls for his arrest. The clear message was, "If you were the ICTY, would you trust these guys?"

EUROPEAN COMMISSION FORESEES NO CHANGES IN ACTIVITIES

[1](#)5. (C) Christos Makridis, political counsellor at the European Commission's Zagreb mission, told EconOff today that he had not seen any adverse political reaction to the delay so far. If the postponement is a matter of months, business will go on more or less as usual, with EU programs continuing to assist in preparing Croatia for membership. If the delay does drag into years, Makridis said, the public could turn against necessary and sometimes painful reforms.

FRANK

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